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Interplay of Cultural Constraint, Colonialism and Self-fashioning in M.K Binodini's *The Princess and The Political Agent* (1976)

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Abstract
This paper studies M.K Binodini's Sahitya Award winning novel *Bor Saheb Ongbi Sanatombi* (1976) (translated as *The Princess and the Political Agent*) as a narrative about Sanatombi (a princess), who, finding herself caught between forces of colonialism and patriarchy, tried to negotiate her own space and shape her own female subjectivity. First, using Stephen Greenblatt's idea of culture, it will be shown how it works as a "technology of control". Secondly, how culture acts as both a limitation and an enabler of mobility, thereby giving the opportunity of crossing boundaries. Thirdly, the site of self-fashioning provided by the encounter of two different cultures – colonial and native.

Keywords: culture, technology of control, mobility, self-fashioning

Text and Cultural Context

M.K Binodini's *The Princess and the Political Agent* (1997) opens with a scene of a sick and lonely Sanatombi, a princess in her 30s, recalling her innocent, carefree youth spent in the palace under Maharaj Chandrakriti, who ruled from 1850 to 1886. She was one of Prince Surchandra's children. People who knew her described her as "unruly, strong-willed, and driven to win" (10). During Chandrakriti's reign, the princes of Kangleipak entirely controlled the kingdom of Manipur, and his royal daughters frequented "the palace for every festival, noisily, happily" (5). The palace, however, was also the scene of disputes among princes with different mothers. Sanatombi saw "the bitter rivalries of the princes, their quarrels, and the entanglements of politics" while he was a young child (9).

Chandrakriti died in 1886 and Prince Surchandra ascended to the kingdom according to custom. After her father came to the throne, she was then "given in marriage" at a young age to a man named Manikchand since she was stubborn and the astrologers claimed she was of strong birth. Rich trader Manikchand frequently traveled to India, leaving Sanatombi at home for months at a time. A headstrong woman (who was also a princess) like her had a tough time trying to adjust to it. She was childless and led an ordinary disappointing life in her husband's house. Her father's reign was short-lived. His half-brothers overthrew him in 1890 and Prince Surchandra sought the British government's assistance and fled to Calcutta, where he later passed away. A political misunderstanding between the political agent and the throne usurpers resulted in the deaths of a few British officials, resulting in the Anglo-Manipur War in 1891, which Manipur lost. Henry Maxwell was appointed the British Political Agent of Manipur after the British Empire included the independent Manipur as a member of its Empire.

One evening, after being snubbed at a Raslila programme at Gobindaji Temple, Sanatombi was walking back alone when Maxwell came upon her. She had already been introduced to Maxwell at a social event before. She was reluctant, but he carried her to her destination on his horse. Later, Maxwell made numerous trips to her house. As time passed, they grew closer. Manikchand learned about it after arriving home and abused her. Sanatombi left the house and went to Maxwell's place. The controversy shocked Manipur's traditional Hindu community. Maxwell was transferred from Manipur. Two years later, Maxwell returned to Manipur as a political agent once more and learned that Sanatombi was still residing in the previous queen's home and had not returned to Manikchand's house. They reconnected and later married according to local custom. Thus, Sanatombi became Maxwell's consort. After nine years, Maxwell's tenure came to an end and left Manipur. Sanatombi declined to accompany him and passed away just a year later, unwell and alone.

The text appears to be a straightforward love story that transcends caste, religion, nation, and politics between a lonely native princess and a concerned British political agent. But the interiority of the narrative reveals a protagonist (who is a woman) encountering a complicated interwoven issues of patriarchy, colonialism, and female subjectivity when the text is placed in its cultural context of the constrictions of the religion-centric native monarchy and its equally conservative subjects and the power-seeking violent colonialism. According to Greenblatt, texts are cultural not just because they make references to things outside of themselves but also because they have successfully assimilated societal norms and situations. (2005;12) Binodini minimizes Sanatombi's cultural background in favor of concentrating on the interiority of her thoughts. In order to demonstrate how culture (literature) functions as a society's technologies of control, I shall highlight the Manipuri cultural framework and insert Sanatombi into it and show that cultural context is not outside the text but is absorbed into it. “And if an exploration of a particular culture will lead to a heightened understanding of a work of literature produced within that culture, so too a careful reading of a work of literature will lead to a heightened understanding of the culture within which it was produced.” (Greenblatt, p13)

The historical setting of Binodini's story is the decade before and following the Anglo-Manipur conflict, which was a period characterized by Hindu-centric values. Meitei Hindus practiced an amalgam of traditional Meitei beliefs and Hinduism. Since the introduction of Hinduism in Manipur in the first part of the 18th century under the king-cum-religious reformer Garibaniwaza, the Meiteis had adhered to a very orthodox form of Hinduism with the monarch at its center. The idol of Govindaji was placed later, in 1776, under the reign of King Bhagyachandra, a devoted follower of Lord Krishna. As Lord Govindaji's trustee, King Bhagyachandra "devoted his kingdom to Lord Govindaji." (Kamei, 277). He himself composed the Ras Leela, which is a dance and musical performance used to glorify God. He was a major lover of the arts. Participating in the Ras Leela was considered a source of pride, good fortune, and a show of devotion to Lord Govindaji.

There are two Ras Leelas in the story that not only demonstrate how ubiquitous it is in people's life but also serve as two pivotal moments in the story's development. First one was after the Anglo-Manipur battle, the British put a seven-years old kid as the nominal king. The Lord Govindaji service ceremonies were kept up as the first indication that things were returning to normal. Sanatombi was invited to a brand-new kunja ras dance. Though reluctant, she went there at the insistence of her husband and mother-in-law only to feel humiliated at sly dig of an insolent woman. Furious and unhappy, she left the place alone though her husband always “assigned a person to accompany her every time.” (133) It was after this that she was confronted by two horse riders. One of them was a foreigner who saluted her. The foreigner was Maxwell, the first Political Agent of colonized Manipur – the man the Meiteis called ‘Menjor Mesin.’ (134) In such an upsetting moment in her life, she met the man who was going to bring about a great change in her

life. Maxwell invited her to sit on his horse but she refused. Later, when they were alone, Maxwell managed to take her on his horse.

The second one was nitya raj performed in the courtyard of the residency under the instruction of Sanatombi. The preparation was done lavishly and it was meant to be the talk of the land. “The dance offered by Sanatombi, the Native Wife of the Big Saheb. The audience looked on in wonder, the elderly wiped away their tears.” (286) After the end of the dance, “everyone wept. The dancers, the singers, the cowherdesses, all wept, remembering an age gone by, in the courtyard of the foreigner.” (288)

“The cultural contact with the Hindu world of India was established during his (Garibaniwaza’s) reign. Pilgrimages to the Hindu holy places became a practice. A number of the members of the royal household including princesses went to the Ganges for pilgrimage under escort of the Brahmin priests.” (Gangmumei Kabui, p.258) Sanatombi had a temple grove in Vrindavan. Manikchand, Sanatombi’s husband, often went to Vrindavan. In addition to being a sign of dedication, it was also something that only the lucky could accomplish in life. When she was living alone after Maxwell had returned to England, she told Mainu, her Brahmin cook, that she was going to give it to Little Majesty. She had given up the plan of moving to Vrindavan.

Additionally, Hinduized Meiteis adhered to "purity and pollution" (i.e., being unclean) and "endogamy" (marriage within caste), two significant aspects of Hindu society. Endogamy was strongly discouraged, although polygamy was acceptable. Caste-based unions were common, but unions outside of caste were not only frowned upon but disciplined. There is the story of Mainu, Sanatombi’s lady Brahmin cook. “The Brahmins formed a separate caste outside the Meitei society” and “the inter-caste marriage was very rare.’ (Kabui, 258). For this very reason, “Mainu and Khema were deeply in love. But they never got married. For Khema was a Meitei.” (162) And Mainu is a Brahmin woman. “In those days, those who violated the boundaries of marriage norms received severe punishment” (164). With threats and humiliation, relatives tried to keep them apart. If one considers the rigidly traditional Meitei culture in which Sanatombi is located, one can better appreciate the drastic measures she has taken to connect her life with Maxwell’s. On a personal level, she must overcome or set aside her Hinduized worldview of purity and contamination in order to accept a man who adheres to a different faith and has different values. On the social front, she must deal with the disapproval of her own family members and public outrage.

Cultural Constraint as a Society's Technologies of Control

Explaining how culture functions in terms of constraints and boundaries, discipline and punishment, Stephen Greenblatt writes, “The ensemble of beliefs and practices that form a given culture function as a pervasive technology of control, a set of limits within which social behavior must be contained, a repertoire of models to which individuals must conform… The most effective disciplinary techniques practiced against those who stray beyond the limits of a given culture are probably not the spectacular punishments reserved for serious offenders – exile, imprisonment in an insane asylum, penal servitude, or execution – but seemingly innocuous responses: a condescending smile, laughter poised between the genial and the sarcastic, a small dose of indulgent pity laced with contempt, cool silence. And boundaries are enforced more positively as well: through the system of rewards that range again from the spectacular (grand public honors, glittering prizes) to the apparently modest (a gaze of admiration, a respectful nod, a few words of gratitude).” (Greenblatt Reader 2005: 11-12p) According to Greenblatt, literature is a part of the cultural reinforcement of boundaries between that which is approved and not, that which is legitimate and not, that which is legal and not, as it is seen in the praise and blame fond in literary genres such as satire and panegyric. (Greenblatt Reader 2005: 11-12p)

In the story, the phrases "treading on the king's garment" or "stepping on the hem of the king's garment" alludes to breaching an unwritten border that could, in this example, result in punishment, indicating the existence of a barrier. Chancellor Meri, the ras dance teacher, (the head of dancers' council), had fallen in love with Princess Phandengsana. He was wrong to think that there was nothing wrong in loving a woman. His uncle warned him that the woman he loved was no common woman but the daughter of the king. For this transgression, he was severely punished. 'He was made to pray at all the temples. He was taken to the marketplace and paraded around the villages. Then he was tonsured in front of the palace citadel and spreadeagled in the sun upon a wooden frame.' (34) This applies not to the commoners only. There is the case of the Lady of Chongtham, one of the king's consorts, who was accused of casting a black spell, for which she had to go back to her maiden home. Dasumati once told Sanatombi that "the palace is a place where people are destroyed quickly if they do not know to conduct themselves according to its ways.' (90)

In addition to residing with the values and customs of the Hinduized Manipuri culture, Sanatombi, being a princess, is also intimately connected to the historically male-centric Manipuri monarchy, in which the throne has been passed down to male heirs for millennia. Sanatombi was described by the novelist as "unruly, strong-willed, and driven to win," (10) foreshadowing a choice she would make later in life that would cross a line. She bit Prince Lukhoi when they got into a fight. Prince Lukhoi was a boy who would one day "ascend the throne at Kangla," hence there was a limit that had to be crossed. (11). He was the son and she was the daughter, thus explaining the difference. She escaped punishment since she was also a princess. The statement "It would have been better if she had been a boy" (10) only expresses a goal that merely undercuts her standing as a woman in the social hierarchy. She could not change the fact that "a daughter had no claim upon the throne at Kangla." (12) When she questioned this tradition, her own mother, Jasumati said, "You seem to have forgotten that you are a girl. How can you be the same as Lukhoi? He is a male offspring. He is going to be king." (53) Her mother reminded her of the invisible social boundaries, 'Sanatombi, you are a daughter, so conduct yourself with that knowledge.' (12) Sometimes, with approval from the Grand Queen Mother, the stubborn girl was allowed to dress in boy's clothes to participate in the Procession of the Crow, a royal festival with the king. It was a taboo yet she got away with it because she was backed by the Grand Queen Mother and the king (the symbol of feudal-monarchy-patriarchy). (51) Her mother was worried that she was going to come to grief on her account. "How can boys and girls be the same? We are called women with no burial place." (53)

When Sanatiombi was a young girl, the Grand Queen Mother never once remarked to her, "You are a female; you are of inferior destiny." (12) This was done out of love and should not be taken as an affirmation that she was equal to man. Sanatombi struggled as a child to internalize the patriarchal-monarchical milieu and family-based social construction of gender that she was exposed to. This conflict first appeared in innocent ways, and she can be seen struggling to accept it throughout the story in both her actions and thoughts. These cultural beliefs, rooted in the patriarchal ideology (a set of societal norms and practices) that priorities the values and interests of males as a group, and supposedly leads to men's dominance in relationships with women, appear to favour men in terms of power and empower men while disempowering women. (Wood, 2005).

Sanatombi struggled to adapt to life as a housewife after her marriage to Manikchand. Her husband Manikchand was a businessman who frequently spent months away from home in Cachar in order to make money. His family was "hard-working and thrifty," and they didn't try to impress others "simply because a princess had married into their family." (71) Their simple way of life continued as before. Sanatombi, who was lavish, struggled to fit in. She was often reminded by Manikchand that even though she was the princess of Manipur at the time, her father was no longer the ruler of Manipur. She needs to act in line with that. (71-72)

Uncertainty reigned in the aftermath of the Anglo-Manipuri conflict. Her spouse had gone to Cachar. She worked hard and had a typical woman's life, utilising the weaving technique she had learned in the palace. She miscarried and could not conceive again. Although the marital issue that resulted from it isn't depicted openly, Sanatomba's instructions to her mother-in-law to find a second bride for her son indicated her mental state. In Manipuri society, a childless lady is frequently denigrated. It must have been difficult for Sanatombi to agree with such an unwritten norm. She sensed her family's accusation even though they did not express it to her outright. She was proud and sincere enough to admit that she did not want to be responsible for the end of a family line.

Then, a married woman talking to or going out with another man other than her husband and relatives was looked at with disapproval. A married woman (that too, a married princess) with a stranger (that too, a white man), was a strict no-no. Sanatombi's growing relationship with Political Agent Maxwell, the enemy, was a scandal that damaged the royal honour. The carpenter's workshop where Sanatombi and Maxwell used as their secret meeting place was burnt down because they said "it was defiled…" (242) "It was a national scandal, on the other, there was defilement" (243). The Dowager Queen did not want to be part of this mess (243). The Dowager Queen said "Sanatombi is still Manikchand's wife."

As endogamy was highly opposed, her subsequent marriage to the white man could not be taken as a socially acceptable match (for both of them it might be a convenient one). It could be considered a last-ditch effort to preserve her reputation. The fact that she was a princess (and the other man, a British Political agent) excuses her from punishment. In the writer's forward, she mentioned about children singing as they played, "Sanatombi, you are lost to us, you are lost to us" (xxvii), and about her own blood-relatives censuring her for her act (xxviii). "The Meiteis believed that he had ensnared the princess of Manipur" (222) with some kind of witchcraft. "Sanatombi, the royal daughter of Surchandra, has gone completely mad" (241). Jasumati, her mother, never visited her as "she could never forget the sobriquet Sanatombi the Defiled, Native Wife of the Big Saheb. The affliction Sanatombi had caused in her Jasumati nursed to the day she died " (281). During the visit of the Viceroy to Manipur, Sanatombi (now the wife of the Political Agent) wanted to help Little Majesty get ready herself. "But that was forbidden- she could not touch, she had to watch from afar. Sanatombi the consort of the Big Saheb stood out in the courtyard and inquired about Little Majesty and came back." (268) "Little Majesty came but left early without dining. Maxwell said to the Viceroy, "Your Excellency, custom doesn't permit the raja to join us at dinner." (272)

Sanatombi is unsure of her religious affiliation because of her marriage to Maxwell. Even though she had eaten fish, she nevertheless employed a Brahmin cook to manage her kitchen. It doesn't imply that she has adopted her husband's faith or given up her own. She was aware that she had crossed a line. "Sanatombi has not worn her marriage sandalwood paste since she became the consort of the Saheb – but she never stopped applying clay to her forehead… she even takes a little of the holy basil clay with her whenever she travels with the Saheb" (92,93). When her early personal rebellion against the religion or social restraint has run its course, she eventually reaches a point in the story where she seeks reconciliation with the cultural constraint rather than challenging it. It is possible to interpret her wish to host the nitya ras in the residency's courtyard as an act of atonement in which she seeks both social acceptance and a reaffirmation of her religious beliefs, kind of her public apology to both the people and Lord Govindaji.

As an excommunicated woman, Sanatombi's wish could not be fulfilled without some discussion among the political and cultural elites over questions like: Was she allowed to dance? Would the ras she offered be accepted by the gods? If the concert took place in her courtyard, what would the land say? First it was discussed with the Dowager Queen. In turn, the Lady of Ngangbam called elders and scholars of the region, including the king of Moirang and others, and held consultations with them. Little Majesty, who was away at school in Ajmer, was requested for

permission in a letter. (282) It was accepted. Dance instructors concurred that the princess was performing "the dance with a pure heart" and that the ras performed in a foreigner's courtyard should be overlooked. It was also decided that since the performance would take place in a foreigner's courtyard, the Divine Majesty Bhagyachandra's ras clothes should not be worn. (283) They ultimately chose to perform it in the same fashion as the dancers' council in the North Indian style. Sanatombi was aware that the event would not only become the talk of the town but would also be recorded in the royal chronicles. When the Native Wife of the Big Saheb offered her dance and the crowd gasped in amazement, and the elderly wiped away their tears with love and devotion. At the end of the dance, listening to the prayer of Surchandran, everyone wept. “The dancers, the singers, the cowherdesses, all wept, remembering an age gone by, in the courtyard of the foreigner.” (288)

When Maxwell went back to England, Sanatombi spent a life of isolation and illness visited only by a few. Her death came to her without the comfort of the very person for whom she had given up so much. The fact that she has never been accepted by her relatives and the people is shown clearly during the time of her funeral. When she was cremated following her wish according to the Hindu rites, only five or ten mourners walked behind her bier. After it was over, “the two or three foreigners among the mourners stand around for a while and then they go back quietly. The people who have come bathe and hasten away. No one is there to even bite the cremation bamboo tie and toss it in the fire. No relatives or close of kin carries the pot of water around the funeral pyre.” (306) It was a deplorable cremation, unfit even for a common individual, let alone the cremation of a princess or the wife of a Big Saheb. Examining Binodini’s novel, which is a fictional story of the real Sanatombi, Ch. Manihar Singh wrote, ‘In real life except for some short-lived enjoyment of worldly pleasures while residing in the Residency, she was a social outcast for the rest of her life.” (271-2)

Colonial Intervention and the Space of Mobility

In Manipur, the first British Political Agent was appointed in 1835. Normal times saw less of their involvement in the kingdom's political affairs. Their office was only required when princes competed for the crown. The Manipuri princes' fight of succession provided a great opening for the Political Agent to meddle in the state's internal affairs. The princes in charge constantly enlisted this office's assistance and help in order to accomplish their goals. It made the British assume that Manipur would not be able to stand alone without their assistance. One school established by W.F Nathall in 1872 was not working well. Later when Sir Johnstone requested for setting up another English school in 1885, it was rejected. The reason for its objection, according to Sir Johnstone’s mind, “the Durbar naturally objected, … their subjects learning English would eventually mean a better administration of justice, and a gradual sweeping away of abuses.” (130) But he succeeded in setting up a school and some students were forced to come there for education. It was said that students who had been to school were considered as polluted and had to leave their books outside the house and wash themselves to go inside their houses. The fact is that the people were deeply rooted in a feudal society with a semi-divine king at its centre and were still unaccustomed to modern political institutions and principles.

In 1891, King Surchandra took the help of the then Political Agent, Mr. Grimwood. The subsequent murder of Mr. Grimwood and other British officials brought about the 1981 Anglo-Manipur war. Manipur lost it and the British added the autonomous kingdom to their Empire. When her uncles attempted to overthrow her father, she initially believed they were the enemy. Later, when the British invaded Manipur, Sanatombi thought, “their enemy now was the British Government. It was not Koiren, it was no Kulachandra, it was nobody else.” (77) It was common to hold this opinion while the nation was in danger. Her mental state after Manipur was seized is not made explicit, though. The possibility is that her uncles did not take her as a threat to the throne.

Even if she took her uncles as the enemy, she could do nothing about it. Her husband was a trader and did not show any interest in any political affairs. It's probable that after the war, after all of her uncles (who were her enemies) had gone, she did give it some thought. The tragic political interference of the British government, her father's exile in Calcutta, the choice of a five years old as the heir, the demise of her brother (the legitimate heir) and the subsequent demise of his father—all resulted from her uncles' attempt to seize the kingdom. The writer (herself being a royal relative) cleverly steered clear of this angry, disgruntled side of the character's mentality. With the aid of her spouse, she attempted to learn about the condition of her father in Calcutta. Her spouse's failure to get the information upset and depressed her though she did not express it.

According to Greenblatt, culture may both be a limitation and an enabler of mobility. Only when there is movement and the possibility of crossing boundaries have real value. The majority of people will be able to find a way to abide by enforced limitations, frequently without even being aware that these constraints are in existence. A constraint is experienced when an action is prohibited. There is no way to perceive a barrier if there isn't the flexibility to encounter it. Following the British annexation of Manipur, colonial culture (and authority), which had previously existed without much of an impact outside the limit of native culture, quickly became an immediate environment. The new ruler brought in new changes: the old tax-paying system of *lallup* and slavery became non-operational, new tax system was introduced. The child-majesty was sent to a school in Ajmer (probably the first king to get to a school). Instructions given to Maxwell were: "He should exercise those powers with due regard for the customs and traditions of the Manipuries and should endeavour to interfere as little as possible with the existing institutions, in so far they might be compatible with the peace and good order." (Quoted by Lal Dena. p74.) Politically Manipur joined the British Empire, but cultural encroachment had not yet occurred. Culturally, Manipur society carried on with its old ways.

Following the unexpected encounter, the newly appointed British Political Agent of Manipur, Henry Maxwell seemed to take a liking for Sanatombi, the married princess. This accidental meeting Sanatombi and Maxwell is the meeting of two different cultures and the beginning of boundary crossings. Because of his lack of understanding of or disrespect for native culture, Maxwell granted her (a married woman) a ride on his horse. As soon as he was gone, she took a bath as she was touched by, according to Ch. Manihar, "a profane *mlechha*". During the turbulence and mayhem of the battle, some (the princesses) had become so poor that they had to eat rice with water chestnuts as meals. They were experiencing extreme suffering, much like the fabled arrogant python that starves itself to death. In order to develop paddy fields for the princesses, according to the Royal Dowager Queen, they would require "the permission of the foreigners." (149) Without the Saheb's directives, they were unable to cultivate or market paddies. Sanatombi was instructed to go with the others to meet the Saheb in order to ask for permission to maintain their paddy fields. At that time, Sanatombi's husband had gone to Vrindavan. At first, Sanatombi disagreed, saying she would "rather sell vegetables than ask them" (150), Later, she agreed and went with others to talk with Maxwell for negotiation of not stopping "the princesses of the sovereign king from tilling new paddy fields, you must not tax these lands, and so on." (154-55) Maxwell said he could not proceed without consulting his superiors.

When Maxwell saw Sanatombi two months later, he informed her of the Viceroy's letter approving the princesses' usage of the paddy fields. (188) He had to go back from the gate since he was not allowed inside. On his subsequent visit, he was given permission to enter the courtyard. After he left, the area could be purified using the holy water Manikchand had brought from the Ganga. Sanatombi liked talking to him. She once questioned him as to why Lai Haraoba celebrations had been discontinued. Then, at her urging, he gave the king of Moirang permission to restart the event in the same manner as before. When he failed to appear for several days, she began to miss him. Mainu informed Sanatombi that the Political Agent must be obsessed with her because

of his repeated visits. Mainu warned her that they didn't speak the same tongue and they were not friends also. "This Saheb is going to cross a lot of boundaries, Your Highness. It is better if we don't let him in… Your husband is not here either." (194) Sanatombi remained silent. She was pushing the limits herself. Maxwell was all she could think of. They rode out one evening to check the finished road and returned late. That evening Mainu returned home and cried for Sanatombi. Mainu was aware of Sanatombi's growing ties to the Saheb. Once Maxwell said to her, "I am sorry for you all. A woman can reign in England. If Manipur had this custom, I would have recommended you… I am your enemy, but I am not a greedy enemy." (196) Sanatombi cried as she listened to him.

The writer does not show a moment of tenderness between Manikchand and Sanatombi. She struggled to adapt to life as a commoner since she was a volatile, obstinate princess. Her hubby was frequently absent. He couldn't expect her to act like a submissive housewife. When, after his return, Manikchand learned about his wife's interaction with Maxwell, his manly Meitei ego felt degraded. In the orthodox community, his wife meeting a stranger—let alone a white man, the enemy and colonizer—was simply intolerable. Manikchand, incensed and dishonoured, reminded the princess that her father was no longer the king and that princesses acting haughtily when people were under the king could no longer occur. Even if she was a princess, she was the daughter of a deposed king. 'Do not do as you please, it will not be good for you.' (215) Her royal ego was bruised when her father was brought up. The house's tranquility was broken starting on that day. Sanatombi, who was depressed and wretched, kept thinking about Maxwell's "calm manner of speaking" (216), which was so different from the Meitei husbands' treatment of their wives as objects. The two were divided by an "unbridgeable gulf". Her sentiment is conveyed in this way: "Why have I stayed here in this house for so long? What should I do now, where should I go? There was no place to go." (216)

She was already considering leaving the house. A small push was all she needed. She found it in the words - "My father, a deposed king. She saw Kangla before her eyes." The questions: if Maxwell had not been there in her life, would she have left the house? If it had been another common man, would she leave Manikchand? The pride of the princess blinded her from seeing her unseemly conduct of going out with Maxwell while her husband was absent from home. The same pride was wounded when her husband said, "your father, a disposed king." She felt that she had received horrible treatment from Manikchand but she did not see Manikchand's dishonour in the public eye. Although she believed Manikchand had treated her horribly, she was blind to his disgrace in the eyes of the general public.

It appears that it was neither love nor passion that drove her to the arms of the Big Saheb. The talk between Mainu and Sanatombi shortly after Khema, Mainu's beloved, died due to severe sickness is nothworthy. A traumatic Mainu said to Sanatombi, "Your Highness, you are a princess. You will not have known the face of love." (167) Truly, she accepted it. "It was true Sanatombi had never known the face of love. She had not endured the pangs of love, she never had a chance to love." (167) Considering her view, one can say that it is not merely for love or passion that she had gone to Maxwell. Even if the author tries to convey that everything happened in a type of delirium, one can't help but perceive something else in it. If it occurs while she is in a state similar to delirium, she is not morally accountable for it. Another interesting thing is that when she is half-consciously leaving her house, it is said "She saw Kangla before her eyes." Kangla is important since it serves as both the emblem and the seat of power. The thing that gives her power is what she remembers in her final moment of weakness. If she wanted, she could have chosen to go to the Dowager Queen's house. She did not do that. Or one can say that in her delirious state, it did not occur to her.

She was softened by Maxwell's small acts of compassion, respect (as befitted a princess), and understanding. Maxwell entered her life when she was at her lowest point of depression and

powerlessness. She was portrayed as a lonely lady who had been abandoned by historically male-centric traditions, ignored by an uncaring, absent husband who had failed to provide the life a princess deserved, and last, caught in the helpless drudgery of everyday women. She must have found the Big Saheb's (a representation of British authority) show of respect and attention to her and his impeccable British manners to be fascinating. Sometimes, it gives the impression that more than the love angle, it was more to do with the allure of power. It is reasonable to believe that, even while she was in feverish confusion, she used her conscious will to some extent. To her, perhaps, more than the man himself, the authority he represented must be alluring. Being close to him gave her access to the power she had been denied because she was born a woman and not a male. After getting married to the political agent, one could argue she was in a position of influence and it didn't really matter what people and society thought of her. It was Maxwell who gave her the final push and she, subconsciously, chose Maxwell's residence. After all, Maxwell is the very person who brings back her old rebellious self, her old domineering royal self, that cannot stand being disrespected. To put it another way, when she is desperate and angry, her inherent will comes to the surface and provides her the power to resist some socially oppressive customs. She was also, in some ways, emboldened by Maxwell's "a woman can reign in England," practice of a different society where a woman's status was given her rightful due. She must also be thinking about the sad historical fact of the annexation of Manipur by a stronger political force. In her vulnerable moment, perhaps, she did not need to take the social ideals of a weak vanquished people seriously because the native king, who had served as the centre of power, was no longer there.

Maxwell's cardboard character is given only a few common dialogues and the reader is not permitted to see what's going through his mind. He is shown as a decent person rather than the hard-hearted, aggressive colonial type who cursed people when they were seen crossing the road or beating them for failing to salute. Maxwell is shown as a romantic who is constantly sorry for their dominance over the tiny nation. He "went to the hills all the time. How beautiful were the hill ranges of Manipur." (225) "He loved them all. Their simple, lovely homes, with groves of bamboo, rows of banana trees, little ponds, duck, pigeon, chicken coops, and pigsties- all of them were new to him, new and beautiful." (226) However, this human aspect is not present in the administrative reports written by British political agents, who were dry, logical documenters, indomitable officers constantly learning about Manipur in order to assess, control, discipline, and dominate their subjects. Their administrative papers reveal their colonial opinion of the Meities as being similar to other hill tribes, notwithstanding Meities' Hindu superiority masks. Meiteis and hill tribes are members of Edward Said's Oriental, who is described "irrational, depraved (fallen), infantile, strange," (superstitious) and "therefore the European" (the Britisher) is "rational, virtuous, adult, "normal"(40) and generous. Sidelining Manipur's annexation, Maxwell is presented as the non-exploitative colonial. Maxwell is busy building roads. "Maxwell wanted to win the hearts of the Meiteis." (145) Maxwell may have been motivated to be close to her because of his pity for Sanatombi's vulnerable situation, his yearning for a woman, as well as his political drive, to win the Meiteis' favour.

It will not be wrong to say that Sanatombi becomes the exotic princess, the object of a colonialist's attraction. She is someone unruly yet childlike, stubborn yet vulnerable, proud yet pitiful, someone to be handled with the condescending understanding of a mature, rational British officer. But it was his lack of understanding (or lack of respect or maybe his overwhelming love has blinded him about everything) for Manipuri Hindu society of that time partly encourages in breaking up Sanatombi's house. However, it was his lack of comprehension (or lack of respect, or his excessive love for her) for Manipuri Hindu society of the period that helped to partially incite the destruction of Sanatombi's home. Sanatombi and Manikchand's already fraying relationship was made worse by the insensitive colonial Maxwell. As a result of her husband's abuse, which included beating and humiliating her, she was compelled to leave his home.t is this crushing situation that

forces her. She is to be blamed partly for it too. Afterall, she agreed to go out with him on a horse in the evening to see the finished road. She was aware of the consequence. As a daughter of a former divine king, she thought she could cross the boundary. Maybe the British gentleman's charm (it cannot be separated from the fact of his powerful status) makes her forget herself, yet in her self-forgetfulness one can say that she also regained her autonomy, "the power to impose a shape upon oneself" (Greenblatt, 1980: 1) and control her identity. Maybe, out of a sense of propriety, the novelist was reluctant to give Sanatombi the benefit of a full agency. The superstitious folk believed she was affected by the white man's witchcraft and did not want to consider the reality that she was a free person and made her decision regarding Maxwell on her own will.

Self-fashioning and/vs Self-cancellation

In *Renaissance Self-Fashioning*, Greenblatt suggests "a new stress on the executive power of the will" which equally has "the most sustained and relentless assault upon the will" (1980: 1). Characteristics of self-fashioning include social status, obedience to authority, a relationship with another person in which the other person is perceived as threatening, alien, or disorderly, as well as a complex interaction between the self, the other person, and the authority that calls into question elements of all of them. Greenblatt argues that "self-fashioning occurs at the point of encounter between an authority and an alien, that what is produced in this encounter partakes of both the authority and the alien that is marked for the attack, and hence that any achieved identity always contains within itself the signs of its own subversion or loss." (1980: 9)

One may argue that this historical moment of contact between colonial and indigenous cultures creates a location of freedom that inspires new perspectives on the self and society. But this location also meets forces that want to put an end to these new perceptions by opposing them. It may be said that Sanatombi's choice of Maxwell over Manikchand is an example of the exercise of the executive power of her will. Sanatombi is after all no subaltern or a marginalized subject. She is a princess of a native kingdom, small in the eye of the powerful colonial outsiders but big in the eye of its people. One cannot talk about her helplessness in the face of oppression or violence, be it domestic or public. She feels she is mistreated but this mistreatment is of a different kind. However, put her in the context of the feudal-monarchical system, she is surely made powerless because of her being a princess, not a prince. She thought (and some thought so too) that she was more capable than her brother, that she could have ruled better than her brother, if not, for its historical patriarchal model. For centuries, it has been the male who has been on the throne of Manipur. She had to live with that. During time of her marriage, her individual desires and longings, like many of the princesses, were not given priority. With Maxwell and his modern culture, it could be said that she got her desires fulfilled and power negotiation done to her satisfaction.

Soon after the incident of Sanatombi running to off Maxwell's residence, he was transferred from Manipur. The Maxwell-Sanatombi scandal had shaken the land. (238) Two years later, he returned as Political Agent again and came to know that Sanatombi was not living with Manikchand anymore but was in the residence of Dowager Queen. He realized that he was partly the cause of the breakup. "In his long life as a soldier… he had met Sanatombi in this distant land in all its green beauty. This bright spark was a flower that blossomed among the thorns—forbidden to touch, forbidden to get close to." (235-6) Later, he secretly met her and "That day, for the first time, Sanatombi was defiled by the Big Saheb." (239) "It has clearly predicted in the manuscripts that the royal blood would be defiled by the white man." (245) Given the cultural differences between the two, the use of the word "defiled" as if it were an act that rendered her unclean rather than consummated is instructive. When people came to know of their secret meeting place, it was burned down. The Dowager Queen had to make the relationship official privately in order to prevent further embarrassment. "You are now a son-in-law of our clan… but this is not a custom amongst

the Meiteis." (244) Her royal relatives perceived Sanatombi's union with Maxwell as an advantageous alliance. "If Sanatombi is clever, she could even be able to be of much use to Manipur." (245)

They lived in the new residency at the Konthoujam homestead. "The residency was filled with Meiteis all day." (256) "It was beginning to get hard to say what the residency in Manipur was, whether a Manipuri household or the household of a foreigner." (257) "Sometimes Maxwell would take Sanatombi to dinner at other foreigners' homes in Manipur." (257) "Sanotombi began to adapt to Maxwell's lifestyle, and Maxwell was no longer roundabout with Meitei lifestyles. Maxwell Saheb (along with Sanatombi) looked after Maharaj Churachand "when he was still a boy until the time he was able to take over the reins." (94) One time Maxwell took Sanatombi abroad with him and stayed away for about three months. This was the first time Sanatombi has stepped outside Manipur." (258) She enjoyed Shillong and Maxwell "thought of retiring in Shillong, of getting a house with some land." They brough back a piano. He did find the land he wanted but he bought the piano from a Parsi landlady and brought it to Imphal, thinking, he might "even teach Sanatombi how to play it." (262) One day, he played the piano and said his mother played the piano and sang beautifully and his family would gather around to listen to their mother and it made them feel as one. (262) "Maxwell talked about many things- about his native land, about his distant home, about his wild, unsettled life." (263) But he never mentioned about his wife and children back in England. Naturally, Sanatombi, despite their intimacy, had her doubts about their future. "She felt frightened that this man from a distant land might grow distant from her." (263)

To the eye of a parochial uneducated native, the life of the colonials is probably nothing but a big invisible power/culture, which is beyond her or her comprehension. Despite their mutual feelings, there are still cultural obstacles that neither of them can hope to overcome. Their relationship seems clear only in the context of Manipur. Taken out of it, it becomes blurred, almost irrelevant. Sanatombi sensed it in her own ways. She is intelligent enough to know her limits and refuses to demand more than he can give. The piano which she couldn't appreciate, or the time they were together with other whites in a party in Shilchar. When Maxwell was transferred to Silchar and Sanatombi went with him. She did not like the place. One day, Maxwell took her to a dinner party in the house of a man from tea estate where "wealthy people from the surrounding tea estates arrived all dressed up" coming with "many beautiful ladies - cleavage bared, in backless dresses, many tiny-waisted white maidens." (275) Her cultural ignorance and discomfort in the Britishers' cultural setting is found in following lines. "The men and women in the room swayed to the music. One man with one woman, embracing each other in a dance…Sanatombi felt embarrassed; he had never seen men and women openly hold each other before. She turned her face to one side, she tried not to see…Then she saw suddenly: Maxwell was also dancing with a lovely lady. His arm was around her narrow waist. Sanatombi's heart raced, she turned her face away so as not to see. But she saw-the two held each other very close, the woman's breasts seemed to be touching Maxwell's chest. They seemed to be whispering to each other, and Maxwell laughed." (275-6) Coming late together, Maxwell was very happy, but Sanatombi felt very small. She felt miserable and hurt. When Maxwell asked if she had enjoyed herself, Sanatombi sobbed. Maxwell was alarmed and asked her, "What is the matter, what is wrong, did anybody say anything to you…?" (276)

The social mobility that allows Sanatombi and Maxwell movements between religion and social positions comes with new limits on that mobility, and an awareness of alternative forms of social, theological and psychological organization coexists with attempts to eliminate these alternatives. Maxwell may be sympathetic to the native but other British officers do not share his view. "Droves of Meiteis started coming to the residency now. They were able to air many grievances and make requests without misgiving. Even though the arrogant British did not like the Meiteis treating the residency so casually, no one could say it openly. The reason was that the person at the top approved it. Other sahebs in Manipur nursed their resentment secretly." (281)

There is the incident of burning the Junior Saheb's house. "This was the second time his house had been set on fire. It was suspected that the Meiteis were responsible for the arson because they hated the Junior Saheb…. He (Junior Saheb) had the practice of beating Meiteis on the road-for not saluting him, for not folding their umbrellas when they saw him. " (289)

Maxwell knew it that the Meiteis were still unable to accept the sahebs as their masters. "The Junior Sahib was angry with the Big Saheb Maxwell. He had not taken strong action when his house had been burnt down the first time and so the Meiteis were not afraid of him, and on top of that he had taken a Meitei woman as his native wife. It was to be expected that he himself would side with the Meiteis. The Junior Saheb was not pleased and the other sahebs were also not happy." (290) Maxwell issued an order that "the security guard of Imphal would get the populace to haul in teak from Kabaw in Burma and they must rebuild the bungalow of the Junior Saheb." (290) The furious people refused to obey it. Princes suspected to be behind it, had to go into hiding. It was in fact the handiwork of an irate man, nothing to do with any conspiracy. Sanatombi could not do anything about it. It was the first time that people were standing up to the might of the sahebs since they came to power. "The people did not approve, and they were not afraid to oppose it however powerful the sahebs were." (294)

According to Lal Dena, the women's agitation of 1904, the first anti-imperialist movement, was in fact a build-up of several factors, like, the choice of a five years old boy as the ruler of Manipur which was contrary to the wishes and expectations of the local people; the policy of disarmament of the population of the country related with the autocratic policy of the British authorities; other autocratic policy of the British authorities which greatly affected the economic life of the country. (117-119) Maxwell's order only pushed the people towards a political hysteria. Some were arrested but nobody was informed about the culprit. "And then the women started. They came in droves and shouted at the Big Saheb, "Remove this unreasonable order." Maxwell, the administrator of the land of Manipur, refused to quash it as his administrative skill was being questioned by other British officers too. ".. the women forced their way in-many angry women. They stood in clusters in front of the Big Saheb's bungalow: they would not leave, they stood there, shouting: 'do not oppress our men.' They shoved the soldiers in the market; there were injuries." (295)

Women agitators were in the courtyard of the residency. Maxwell and other officers did not come out. The agitators were shouting, "Sanatombi, what are you doing? You come out. Aren't these your fathers and uncles who have been arrested? Why do you sleep in the Saheb's bed forgetting your mothers and your children?" Sanatombi "came to the realization for the first time-the room she was in belonged to the foreigners. She felt a strange, unknown blow she had not known before, that she had not realized all these days. Today she seemed to know its reason. There had been a void somewhere, everything had come to a standstill. There was nothing to hold on to-she was all alone…. She saw before her eyes-Koireng, Thanggal, her Sovereign Father. The people beyond these walls were her people-the hurt people of her land." (296-7)

The order was not withdrawn but "the arrested noblemen were taken to India and they were released once they reached there, free to go anywhere they wished." (298-9) The situation calmed down. Within a few months, transfer order for Maxwell came. Another political agent would replace him. Maxwell knew that he would not be assigned to go back to Manipur again. He had no time to build his house in Thongjaorok or buy the house in Shillong. He told Sanatombi he would retire and go home and asked her to come with him. "To go or to stay, both were difficult for her. She knew the reserved Maxwell held in many hardships. A strong bond tied him to his homeland. A bond she could not break free from also tied her down, but Sanatombi was afraid. She was afraid to break the cord that tied her to this land. She also could not think of spending her days without Maxwell." (300) This is the same Sanatombi who crossed the cultural boundaries and defied social rules. Maxwell told her to come with him as orthodox Manipur would never accept her. (300) "He

also knew his mighty England would not receive her warmly." This is the same Maxwell who once said "a woman can reign in England." The fact is that Maxwell was a married man with two children left in England. They got separated with a mutual understanding of each other's limits. Maxwell's life of fourteen years in Manipur was over. (248) "Sanatombi is surviving without Maxwell. She is alone." (248) She was thirty-four years old. Maxwell had gone back to England, saying he would return, "I will surely return" (250). Sometimes, she received a Christmas card in winter. The novelist doubts that he would come for her again.

Caught between self-fashioning and self-cancellation, Sanatombi's dilemmas and doubts, her self-assertion and withdrawal, exemplify the conflict at the heart of culture. She defies the authority and society of her era, as well as its codes of conduct, symbols, and representations, by making Maxwell her partner, the Political Agent of the British government which she branded as an enemy before the Khongjom, battle (77). She also comes across as a feminist figure who cleverly negotiates her space, desire and power, in her own private ways. It does not actually disturb the traditional configuration of power as she is not fully accepted, only tolerated, by her own people and culture. More than the restraints of her cultural location or the woman-depowering history, it is basically her need for, first, a compatible man, (she has been neglected by her husband, a commoner), secondly, more subtle, her need for power, or to be in a position of power, and respect, as an extension. Maxwell showed interest in her and she grabbed the opportunity to be back in power. What she could not get in the time of her father, she could do it, albeit in the shadow of Maxwell. The fact that Maxwell is also a symbol of "civilized" colonial patriarchy makes her position all the more complicated. In the eye of the people, at least, she got the fear and respect she lost after the end of her father's reign (and her father's death). Then, one can also say that by daring to be Maxwell's consort, the Christian Saheb, the representative of the British Empire in Manipur, she became the architect of a new female subjectivity that questioned the restricted female subject and her space in the conservative Hinduised monarchy and heralded the beginning of the initiation of conservative Manipuri culture into the modern world.

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